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Never too early to invest in children: Early childhood education and care matters to business!

September 2003

By Charlie Coffey
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“Facts, figures, and return on investment are the kind of language that business understands. And the message is clear: we all bear a burden for failing to provide the “right start” for our children. We bear it as parents, taxpayers and businesspeople. It’s time for business to step up to the plate – it’s time for our leadership voice to be heard in greater numbers.”

Charlie Coffey, September 2003

Using research and business savvy, Charlie Coffey, of RBC Financial Group, presents a compelling case for increased corporate leadership and investment in early childhood education and care. “Whether it’s big business or small business, kids are everybody’s business,” says Charlie Coffey. “It’s time for business to step up to the plate – it’s time for our leadership voice to be heard in greater numbers.” Coffey is convinced that the voices, talent and energy reading this report have the power to advance a system of early childhood education and care that will be successful for children, families and business! Charlie Coffey welcomes your comments and suggestions at charles.coffey@rbc.com.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, public sector, academic and community leaders have invested time, expertise, and resources to improve education and cultivate a prosperous world-class workforce. In this new millennium, it’s become increasingly clear that one of the major missing pieces to better achieving this goal is pushing the envelope on early childhood education and care.

As David Dodge, the Governor of the Bank of Canada asserts: “It’s very recently that early childhood development (ECD) has taken its place in the economic literature, beside schooling, on-the-job training, public health, and informal learning.”¹ There’s no doubt we have Dr. Fraser Mustard and the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research (CIAR) to thank for expanding our brainpower in this area. There’s also no doubt that the time is now to convince corporate Canada to take a more active interest and leadership role in supporting childhood education and care. The key to convincing business revolves around building and selling a compelling business case – demonstrating that early childhood education and care matters to business. Let’s get started...

Research matters to business

Corporate leaders need to hear and talk about research findings to get the message about various risk factors: current and future customers, employees and stakeholders, a healthier workplace (work/life initiatives), increased productivity, a more attractive bottom line and corporate responsibility. Equally important is the contribution of early childhood development and care to the creation and nurturing of human capital. Here’s some research at work that matters to business.

Investment returns

- ✓ Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis maintain that, “Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives...and this is a mistake. Such programs often appear at the bottom of economic development lists. They should be at the top. Studies find that well-focused investments in early childhood development yield high public as well as private returns.”²
- ✓ “For every \$1 spent on child care there is a \$2 economic benefit. The benefit comes back through increased tax revenues, and decreased social, education and health costs.”³

Children’s development

- ✓ A child’s brain development in the first six years of life sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.⁴
- ✓ A study from the Early Years Action Group - Niagara Region, the Early Childhood Community Development Centre and Human Resources Development Canada, found that young children in Niagara Falls fare especially well in social competence, communication skills and general knowledge, and benefit from living in generally safe, stable neighbourhoods with high levels of social support, and parents who make good use of community resources (Integrative Research Report: Early Childhood Development in Niagara Falls, Ontario, August 22, 2003).
- ✓ If the first few years of life include support for growth in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills and social-emotional functioning, the child is more likely to succeed in school and later contribute to society.⁵
- ✓ “Children who are in day-care and other early-childhood programs have a head start in school over those who stay at home with a parent. By the time they get to kindergarten, the children in programs have better communication, learning and math skills regardless of family income or their mother’s education level.”⁶

Human capital development and productivity

- ✓ “Over the current decade, the growth rate in the 0-12 year age group will be negative. The implications of these demographic trends for human capital development [are significant]...with a small cohort of children to replace those retiring over the next two decades, it’s more important than ever that the human capital of children be developed as fully as possible if we are to raise the productivity of a future smaller labour force.”⁷
- ✓ High-quality early childhood education produces “long-term positive outcomes and cost-savings that include improved school performance, reduced special education placement, lower school dropout rates, and increased lifelong earning potential. Not only does high-quality early childhood education make a difference for children, it matters to their employed parents. Employers increasingly find that the availability of good early childhood programs is critical to the recruitment and retention of parent employees.”⁸
- ✓ Companies have also found that there are business benefits, including improved recruitment and retention, when they assist their own employees with early childhood programs.⁹
- ✓ Employees with access to family-supportive programs and policies are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, to be loyal, to go the extra mile to help their companies succeed, and to stay at their jobs.¹⁰

Work-life conflicts

- ✓ It's estimated that work-life conflicts cost Canadian organizations roughly \$2.7 billion in lost time due to work absences (this figure does not include indirect costs such as replacement of the employee during the absence, overtime costs or reduced service or productivity.)¹¹
- ✓ Numerous studies reveal there's a cost to business in not responding to employees' need for reliable and good-quality early childhood programs. Employees are likely to miss work when they spend long hours trying to find early childhood programs or when they deal with the often tenuous arrangements they have, especially when arrangements fall apart. When employees are at work worrying about their children, they have difficulty concentrating.¹²

Dr. Robin Williams, Niagara Regional Medical Officer of Health and Co-Chair of the Early Years Action Group in the Niagara Region, says, "The research is clear: the early years, from birth to age six, have a major influence on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health." That's why this research (and much more) matters to business.

Let's look at one key study closely...

High/Scope Perry Preschool Study in Michigan

This study monitored the lives of 123 African Americans born into poverty, with a high risk of failing in school. From 1962-1967 (at ages 3 and 4), the children were arbitrarily divided into two groups: one that received a high-quality pre-school program based on High/Scope's learning method and another group that received no pre-school program. 95% of the Study participants were later interviewed at age 27. Here are some of the findings:

Educational performance:

- ✓ The pre-school program group had significantly higher average achievement scores at age 14 and literacy scores at age 19 than the no-preschool program group.
- ✓ Almost a third again as many pre-school program group members graduated from regular or adult high school or received General Education Development certification as compared to the no pre-school program group members (71% vs. 54%).¹³

Earnings and economic status:

- ✓ Four times as many pre-school program group members earned \$2,000 or more per month as compared to the no pre-school program group (29% vs. 7%).
- ✓ Almost three times as many pre-school program group members owned their own homes (36% vs. 13%); and over twice as many owned second cars (30% vs. 13%) as compared to the no pre-school program group members.¹⁴

Sheridan College's Child Care Centres in Oakville and Brampton are the first early childhood education facilities in Canada to attain High/Scope Program Accreditation. In addition, the staffs at both centres have achieved High/Scope Teacher Certification. This is good news for Canadian children and Canadian business.

Facts, figures, and return on investment are the kind of language that business understands. And the message is clear: we all bear a burden for failing to provide the "right start" to our children. We bear it as parents, taxpayers and businesspeople.

The time is now for more business leaders to view early childhood programs and child care as an economic issue, not just an education or social issue. This is an important economic issue because early childhood education and care enables parents to work, learn and train while helping to prepare children for a brighter future. In conjunction with the Final Report, Commission on Early Learning and Child Care

for the City of Toronto (May 2002), we must make the wise investments in child care today to ensure a competitive workforce and economy tomorrow and beyond. This matters to business.

Dispelling myths matters to business

Myths have plagued the development of a system of early learning and child care. Two Toronto-based economists, Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky, say that, “Early childhood education and care is good for children, good for mothers, good for families and good for society as a whole. Yet quality early childhood education and care programs are still not universally available for young children.”¹⁵

In their latest work, *Fact and Fantasy: Eight Myths about Early Childhood Education and Care*, Cleveland and Krashinsky outline and respond to these myths, two of which particularly matter to business:

Myth #6: Mothers would prefer to stay at home to care for their own children.

And the response:

- ✓ Mothers are in the workforce in ever-greater numbers. *
- ✓ The current economic contribution of mothers with pre-school children to the Canadian economy can be conservatively estimated at about \$27 billion per year.”¹⁶

*Almost 400,000 children are born each year, and 86% of their mothers return to the workplace in a year (February 25, 2000 – The Globe and Mail).

Myth #8: Child care costs too much for society to afford.

And the response:

- ✓ Although good child care is expensive, it would strengthen the Canadian economy rather than weaken it; spending on child care is an investment rather than a consumption expenditure. *
- ✓ Good child care generates two types of returns – the productivity of the parents freed to enter the labour force and the increase in future productivity of children who receive early educational experiences.
- ✓ Competitiveness is enhanced rather than compromised because good child care makes Canada a better place for companies and their executives to locate; good child care allows mothers to enter the labour force and encourages them to participate in higher education and training to prepare for a life in the labour force, and good child care provides early educational experiences to young children.
- ✓ Children go on to remain in school longer, and acquire more of the skills that make them effective workers in the future.¹⁷

*90% of Canadians support a national child care plan, 86% want a publicly funded system (Initial findings from a poll released by the Canadian Child Care Federation/Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, January 27, 2003).

Nonetheless, a major US study released on July 17, 2003 states that “some children who spend long hours in daycare are more likely to be disobedient and have trouble getting along with others.”¹⁸ Initially, these findings raised eyebrows among parents and advocates. However, the research institute acknowledged that many characteristics relate to child behaviour – and length of time in child care is only one factor. Furthermore, children who experience quality child care had fewer problems.

It’s significant to note that many studies demonstrate a relationship between quality child care and positive outcomes for children. Among many Canadian centres from coast to coast, the Children’s Centre in Ottawa, led by Eleonore Benesch and an outstanding team, is a fine example of quality child

care at work. We need to continue linking research to policy and practice and ensure that quality child care is promoted, delivered and measured. This matters to business.

What's happening on the federal government front matters to business

Minister John Manley's budget announcement (February 17, 2003) of "\$900 million over five years to assist provinces and territories to increase access to quality child care and early learning opportunities, and \$35 million over five years...for First Nations children, primarily on reserve", was a critical step in the right direction.

Since then, a federal/provincial/territorial Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care has been developed/agreed upon – one that builds on the commitments made by First Ministers in 2000. Execution will make the difference. As well, Liberal Party leadership candidates Sheila Copps and Paul Martin have incorporated early childhood development and care in debate platforms and policy vision.

Also in February, Minister Robert Nault (Indian Affairs and Northern Development), released the results of a national survey of First Nations people living on-reserve. Respondents indicated that early childhood education is essential for aboriginal children; it means healthier beginnings and increases overall education success.

When Minister Allan Rock (Industry Canada) and Minister Ethel Blondin-Andrew (Secretary of State, Children and Youth) presented the annual Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence in May 2003, a new award for excellence in early childhood education was introduced.

Minister Jane Stewart (Human Resources Development Canada) continues to speak about *Putting Children First* – saying that, "investing in a sound social policy has a profound and positive effect on Canada's economy." On August 25, she co-chaired a federal/provincial/territorial meeting of ministers responsible for social services in Yellowknife, where the focus was on children's issues and child care.

Senator Landon Pearson's leadership (Advisor on Children's Rights and Vice Chair, National Children's Agenda Caucus Committee) is second to none. The Senate of Canada's newsletter, *Children on the Hill* tells the story.

John Godfrey (MP for Don Valley West and Chair, National Children's Agenda Caucus Committee), has shown impressive leadership with "A National Child Care Strategy: Getting the architecture right now", a Report of the National Liberal Caucus Social Policy Committee with the collaboration of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy (November 2002).

What's happening on the provincial/municipal government fronts also matters to business

According to a report on early childhood education and care (University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit, February 2003), it appears that child care outside Quebec is losing ground. "Quebec has left the rest of Canada in the dust on child care", says Martha Friendly, one of the authors. "But the reason is simple: it's because they set a goal of universal high quality early childhood education and care, adopted a plan with targets and timetables and have dedicated substantial money and resources to achieving it." The question today is: what will Quebec's system look like in the years ahead? An August 26 feature story on CBC's *The National*, indicates that change is on the horizon. The country will be watching with great interest.

Councillor Olivia Chow, Toronto's Children's Advocate says: "Toronto has lost over 1,700 child care spaces in the past year." (June 6, 2003) On August 28, when the annual report of the City's Children and Youth Advocate was released, she added, "Provincial under-funding has seriously eroded the licensed child care system in Toronto and has compelled City Council to pay 100 per cent of the cost of

hundreds of subsidized child care spaces. We have been urging the Province to invest \$18 million of the federal funding it's received but we have had no response.”

Ontario provincial leaders in both the Liberal and NDP parties, Dalton McGuinty and Howard Hampton respectively (not to mention Jack Layton, leader of the federal NDP), are running with a licensed/subsidized child care education plan. Manitoba and Prince Edward Island are making major strides with early childhood development and care programs, as are other provinces. Yet insufficient licenced child care spaces and availability of funds remain ongoing issues. There's a long way to go...and this matters to business.

On March 1, 2003 Toronto Star columnist Michele Landsberg wrote: “Just as there has to be a critical mass of women in parliament before there are enough women’s washrooms, there will have to be real female power – a majority of women will have to vote for their own interests – before childhood care and education for all are an absolute given.”

To return to the compelling words of Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge: “In this province (Ontario), we do not have a minister or ministry charged with the promotion of child development. This was a key issue raised in the original Mustard/McCain study and repeated in recommendation two of their Three Years Later report. Until there is an authority charged with the specific responsibility to raise the readiness-to-learn scores of six-year olds – and an allocated budget to do so...with (the participation of) local community groups, employers, local health authorities, and other government departments...it's unlikely that appropriate action will be taken.”¹⁹ This also matters to business.

Moving forward matters to business

It's clear that early childhood education and care is on the political agenda. Now, this agenda must move forward to the next level, which means putting money directly into child care and making high-quality early childhood education and care a national/universal priority, while focusing on the children most in need. This investment in early education should be a coordinated effort to ensure program quality and to serve more children, including aboriginal children.

Business has a key role to play in helping to *nudge* government action on early childhood development and care issues – in helping to influence public policy. Charles Pascal, of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, wrote about *The Illusion of Leadership* for the Toronto Star: “Ministers should be behaving like the commissioners they appoint. Use experts, listen to users, listen to the publics, make use of the vast resources of their ministries, develop discussion papers, and recalibrate the plans. Then act!” (December 27, 2002)

Business also needs to support governments in developing national/regional early childhood education and care programs to replace the “patchwork” of projects and initiatives that are in place today. Since the underlying goal of corporate responsibility is prosperity for Canada, the private sector should increase its support of children, education and learning. Prosperity depends on well-developed minds - intelligence, imagination, ingenuity and innovation. Advocating sound policy and establishing innovative strategies for early childhood education and care will contribute to Canada's prosperity.

Let's talk about business strategies/action plans...

When it comes to children, there are unlimited business possibilities:

- ✓ workplaces that employ on-site/near-site child care centres
- ✓ child care subsidies
- ✓ after-school programs
- ✓ parental networks, information and referral services
- ✓ investing in/sponsoring targeted children's initiatives

- ✓ workplaces that broaden their scope re job sharing, flexible hours, extended maternity leave, and family care leaves
- ✓ workplaces that encourage representation on children's advocacy boards.

These are all elements of a sound business strategy, and they will aid in developing human capital, promoting a healthier workplace and creating a competitive advantage. This matters to business.

Let's talk about business, government and community partnerships...

"A successful early childhood education system also builds partnerships to govern, finance, sustain, and improve the system."²⁰ There's a whole host of opportunities for business investment in childhood education and care – in employees and families. We must continue to listen to the voice of our employee partners (primarily through work/life initiatives) in order to help meet objectives and expectations.

We also know the private sector can collaborate with governments/institutions and community partners for the development/support of children. Partnerships with the private sector are an essential piece of the Canadian early childhood education and care investment. Corporations are part of the community. And the best solutions are community-based.

Best practices are almost always about partnerships. When it comes to making a difference for children, business has a shared responsibility. Partnerships encourage business to be catalysts for change...to show their heart. What a great way to build a civic/civil society and promote social development. This also matters to business.

And speaking of leadership and partnerships: John Sheridan, Group President of Bell Canada and member of Ontario's Promise (The Partnership for Children and Youth) Board of Councillors, spoke to a breakfast audience in Ottawa on February 24, 2003 about "A Critical Investment in Canada's Future: The Need for Leadership." After reading John's remarks, it's evident he understands the *children connection* - that business partnerships are key to success.

In a nutshell, "a successful early childhood education system views children's learning as the central mission...articulates standards for children's learning and program quality that align with academic standards...ensures that teaching staff possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to help young children enter school prepared to succeed...supports parents as their children's first teachers... provides high-quality program options to parents who choose to enroll their children...and embraces accountability for measurable results."²¹

It's a system that thrives on interdependence and collaboration in order to work and work well - a system that requires leadership at all levels and business leadership at a high level.

Coupled with the ongoing leadership and success of the Business Roundtable, Corporate Voices for Working Families and the Committee for Economic Development in the United States, it's not surprising to hear members of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE) speak out about the business case for early childhood learning with policymakers, peers and other stakeholders – communicating "a belief that education and care of young children is critical to the attraction, recruitment and engagement of today's parent employees as well as a key to economic growth."²²

The CCCE is a marvelous business forum to help shape sound public policy in Canada, North America and the world. And our business leadership hardly stops there. The Toronto City Summit Alliance placed early childhood development on its agenda (June 5, 2003) and children's advocates around the country are encouraging business champions to make childhood education and care a top priority.

David Crane's piece in the Toronto Star speaks volumes: "Some people get it. Some don't. Ontario's neighbour Michigan, seems to get it. Perhaps the single most important key to economic development is

the one that opens the doors of learning in the minds of young ones today,” Michigan’s new governor Jennifer Garnholm said in her recent State of the State address. “On the knowledge economy, business and education are linked.” (March 2, 2003)

Conclusion

When the University of Manitoba’s Dr. Susan Prentice (associate professor of sociology) says that, “Canadian early childhood education today is characterized by *inadequacy, fragmentation and incoherence*” and poses the question, “how are we to make sense of this scenario?”²³, one of the answers is abundantly clear.

It’s time for business to step up to the plate – it’s time for our leadership voice to be heard in greater numbers. “In today’s world, where education and skill levels determine future earnings, the economic and social costs to individuals, communities, and the nation of not taking action on early childhood education are far too great to ignore, especially when the benefits far outweigh the costs.”²⁴

It’s never too early to invest in children – the *bottom line* is that early childhood education and care matters to business!

Author BIO

Charlie Coffey leads government relations and community affairs for RBC Financial Group, Toronto. Prior to his current executive appointment, Coffey led business banking in Canada for five years and headed three geographic regions: Manitoba, Metro Toronto and Ontario.

Throughout his career, Coffey has made community leadership a priority. This native of Woodstock, New Brunswick especially enjoys interacting with young people, entrepreneurs and Aboriginal Peoples. Coffey is co-chair, Commission on Early Learning and Child Care for the City of Toronto, co-chair Champions, Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada, vice chair, National Aboriginal Economic Development Board and a director of several organizations including the Arctic Children’s Foundation, Ontario’s Promise Board of Councillors, Sustainable Development Technology Canada and the Canadian Journalism Foundation.

Phil Fontaine and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs named Charlie Coffey a Honourary Chief for his support of First Nations and their goals of economic development and self-sufficiency. In 2002, Coffey received the Award of Distinction from the Public Affairs Association of Canada.

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"Established in 1972, *The Business Roundtable* (BRT) is an association of 150 chief executive officers of leading corporations, committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth and a dynamic global economy; created in 2001, *Corporate Voices for Working Families* (CVWF) is a coalition of 36 leading corporations, that brings the private sector voice and experience into the public dialogue on issues affecting working families." Both organizations are based in Washington, DC.

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"High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is an independent non-profit research, development, training, and public advocacy organization with headquarters in Ypsilanti, Michigan. High/Scope is best known for its research on the positive, lasting effects of a quality preschool education and its curriculum approach for young children. High/Scope Program Accreditation affirms that an early childhood care center offers learning programs that meet specific and comprehensive standards, including program quality assessment, staff professional development and parent involvement."

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